AMTA Codes and Ethics

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Did you notice that the 1990 Membership Registry contains a new AMTA Code of Ethics? The new Code is also listed in the 1990 AMTA Bylaws in Article XVII – Basic Foundation.

It was developed by the Code of Ethics Revision Committee in 1988, and adopted by the National Board at the AMTA National Conference in Fort Worth in February, 1989. The new Code replaces The Pledge, which, with several variations, was found in the Association Bylaws from the beginning, and the old Code which has gone through major changes over the years.

The Code of Ethics is the foundation of professionalism. It raises us from a simple occupation, provides us with guidelines for ethical conduct and gives us an ideal to aspire to.

Ethics has been defined as "obedience to the unenforceable," and so our code of ethics is a declaration of the general principles of acceptable, ethical professional behavior. Unlike a disciplinary code which is meant to identify wrong conduct and enforce penalties, the code of ethics urges us toward ethical behavior by reminding us what that means in the context of our work.

The AMTA has a long history of promoting professional standards in massage therapy. And even though basic values stay the same, times change and the expression of the principles of ethical conduct must change to reflect current conditions and concerns in the field. The AMTA continues its tradition of professionalism with this latest update of the Code of Ethics.

The Pledge (1943)

When the American Association of Masseurs and Masseuses (AAMM) was established in 1943, before there were bylaws and organizational structure, there was The Pledge. To become a member at that first meeting at the College of Swedish Massage in Chicago on August 16, 1943, you had to pay the dues of 50¢ and sign The Pledge.

Although it was very vague, the Pledge was the first step toward the development of a code of conduct for massage therapists. It reflected a commitment to service, ethical practice and the profession. This Pledge was found in AMTA Bylaws from their first publication in 1946 until it was retired in 1989.

The Pledge of 1946 reads as follows:

1. I hereby pledge to do all I can in the alleviation of pain and discomfort of the patients I am called upon to serve.
2. I will endeavor at all times to uphold the true meaning of my profession.
3. I pledge to conform my office or business with the teachings I have received from my College.
4. I will at all times conduct myself and my business so that I may earn the respect and confidence of all whom I may contact. If I fail to do so, I agree that my membership shall be cancelled, and certificate returned to the Association.
5. I will endeavor to have others in my profession and in my vicinity who are graduates of an accredited college live up to the principles I have heretofore set for myself and to join the Association.
6. To all the above principles I hereby pledge my sacred word of honor.

Minor changes in The Pledge over the years reflected changes in the direction of the profession. Dropping the word "patients" was the result of a shift away from primarily medical applications of massage in physiotherapy, toward broader applications as in health, wellness and sports. Number 1 eventually became "I hereby pledge to do all that I can to help those I am called upon to serve."

In addition, alternative avenues for education were recognized, and since the practice of calling massage schools "colleges" had largely died out, there were general references to teachings and "creditable training." The statement about recruiting others to "join with our Association" had also been dropped.

Although Chapters were supposed to read the document annually at a meeting, by 1989 most members had only a vague idea of its contents. The Pledge had become a little known historical remnant.

Statement of Policy of the AAMM (1954)

In 1954 at the ninth National Convention in Davenport, Iowa, a resolution was passed called the "Statement of AAMM Policy." It was not intended to be a code of conduct, but later become part of the AMTA Code of Ethics. The resolution stated the official AAMM policy defining our relationship with other healing professions.

The Policy Statement first appeared in the Yearbook and Registry of 1955 where it shared a page with The Pledge.

The Policy Statement was adopted at a time when many massage therapists were also physiotherapists, and a clear distinction between physio- or physical therapy and massage therapy had not yet been made. Licensing for physical therapists was being adopted by more and more states, and those licensed practitio-

ners were restricted to referrals and prescriptions from physicians. The practice of independent massage therapists was being threatened.

The Policy Statement is a strong assertion of autonomy from other healing professions, presumably from regular medical practice and the restrictions of physical therapy licensing laws. At the time, it served to clear up some of the confusion between massage therapy and physical therapy as we were shaping our own unique identity.

The Policy Statement continued to appear in the Yearbook and Registry as such until 1965, when it was suddenly renamed the Code of Ethics. It read exactly the same as the 1955 Policy Statement. By this time, there were actually three statements of ethics counting The Pledge, the newly named Code of Ethics (Policy Statement), and a statement of "Professional Ethics and Legal Aspects."

The Lost Code: Professional Ethics and Legal Aspects (1958-80)

A statement of Professional Ethics and Legal Aspects is found in the Yearbook and Registry from 1958 to 1980. This statement was actually a more complete delineation of the ethical situations encountered by massage therapists. It touched on topics such as conversation with clients, draping, confidential information, cleanliness, responsibility, loyalty, referrals, fees, overcharging and client inability to pay. In 1981, when the format of the book changed to a loose-leaf three-ring binder called the Registry, it disappeared from print.

The Eclectic Code (1986-89)

First appearing in the 1986 Registry, was a new eclectic code of ethics. It was a synthesis of The Pledge (1943) and the 1955 Policy Statement, but did not include any of the more detailed items from the statement of Professional Ethics and Legal Aspects (1958-1980). By the time it was retired in 1989, this eclectic code also included a statement from the Bylaws.

The first paragraph stated the purpose and aim of the AMTA and its members as in the Bylaws "to advance

Statement of Policy of the AAMM (1954) [Code of Ethics (1965-80)]

- It is the purpose and aim of the AAMM and its members to work with, and cooperate with, all other healing professions amicably, but to be subservient to none.
- The AAMM and its members recognizes its own limitations, but in the same token is fully aware of its wide field of usefulness in relation to most bodily infirmities.
- The AAMM and its members will recognize and respect all ethical practitioners, and will comply with and follow prescriptions sent with referred cases, unless otherwise arranged or modified with the consent of both parties.
- The AAMM and its members reserve the right to accept patients for treatment without prescription, within the full scope of its possibilities, not conflicting with state laws.

Professional Ethics and Legal Aspects (1958-80)

ETHICS DEFINED. "The science which deals with moral conduct or human duty." The first ethical duty of the massage therapist or technician is to approach the patient, by word, manner, and conduct becoming to a profession that belongs to the Healing Arts. Keep your conversation with the patient professional and friendly. Care should be used in instructing the new patient how to use the sheet, gown, etc., avoiding undue exposure at all times.

SERVICE. Service to our clientele is of utmost importance and this includes neatness and cleanliness of office and massage therapist. Patient's welfare and comfort must be considered at all times. As a professional group, we have a position of trust and confidence with reference to information we have acquired, while attending the patient. Respect and treasure such confidence. Let the patient talk of his aches and pains, but refrain from mentioning your own. Give the best you have to offer under all circumstances.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY. Individuals are valued according to their ability to assume responsibility. A massage therapist or technician should try to cultivate responsibility not only within his scope of service professionally, but also personally as a member of his community. Try to live your life outside of your office, in such a way that you command the respect of all who know you.

LOYALTY. The massage therapist or technician should be loyal to the profession and fellow practitioners, no matter what branch of the healing arts they represent. Refrain from fault-finding and criticism, except where such criticism can be made to those in a position to remedy the situation.

MASSAGE. Therapists or technicians must be ethical in regard to referred patients, either from a fellow practitioner or other members of the Healing Arts. Give the patient exactly what the referring Doctors ask for, and no more–unless they know your ability, and suggest that you use your own judgment. Charge ethical fees for your services. Do not over-charge on insurance cases, or prolong treatment. Do not refuse to aid suffering humanity whenever possible, regardless of the patient's inability to pay for your services.

Eclectic Code of Ethics (1986-89)

It is the purpose and aim of the American Massage Therapy Association and its members to advance the science and art of massage therapy; to keep their conduct and character unquestionable and above reproach; to work and cooperate with all other healing professions amicably, but to be subservient to none.

- The AMTA and its members recognize the limitations of massage therapy and will not prescribe or diagnose for bodily infirmities, and they are fully aware of the wide field of usefulness of massage therapy in maintaining physical fitness.
- The AMTA and its members recognize and respect all ethical practitioners and will comply with and follow prescription for referred cases, unless otherwise arranged or modified by mutual agreement.
- The AMTA and its members reserve the right to accept, without prescription, individuals for treatment, within the field of massage therapy, and not in conflict with state laws.
- Any AMTA member failing to abide by the Code of Ethics shall have his or her membership revoked.

New AMTA Code of Ethics (Adopted 1989)

This Code of Ethics is a summary statement of the standards by which massage therapists agree to conduct their practices and is a declaration of the general principles of acceptable, ethical, professional behavior. Massage therapists shall:

- Have a sincere commitment to provide the highest quality care to those who seek their professional service.
- Perform only those services for which they are qualified and represent their education, certification, professional affiliations and other qualifications honestly.
- Acknowledge the inherent worth and individuality of each person and, therefore, do not unjustly discriminate against clients or colleagues and work to eliminate prejudices in the profession.
- Strive for professional excellence through regular assessment of personal strengths, limitations and effectiveness and by continued education and training.
- Actively support the profession through participation in local, state and national organizations which promote high standards of practice of massage therapy.
- Work in their communities toward the understanding and acceptance of massage therapy as a valuable health service, abide by all laws governing massage practice and work for the repeal or revision of laws detrimental to the legitimate practice of massage therapy.
- Acknowledge the confidential nature of the professional relationship with a client and respect each client's right to privacy.
- Respect all ethical health care practitioners and work together amicably to promote health and natural healing.
- Conduct their business and professional activities with honesty and integrity and project a professional image in all aspects of their practices.
- Accept the responsibility to self, clients and associates to maintain physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

the science and art of massage therapy." It also contained a variation on the content of Pledge #4, i.e., "to keep their conduct and character unquestionable and above reproach."

The first paragraph ended with the assertion of autonomy "to work and cooperate with all other healing professions amicably; but to be subservient to none." The next three sentences repeat the rest of the 1955 Policy Statement (Code of Ethics from 1965-1980).

In 1980, a significant addition to the Code read "Any member failing to abide by the Code of Ethics shall have his or her membership revoked." This was similar to a line in The Pledge, and changed the character of the Code from guidelines for professional conduct to a binding set of rules subject to disciplinary action.

The New Code of Ethics (1989)

The Eclectic Code was an attempt to update the AMTA Code of Ethics by combining the ideas from various sources. It eventually became clear that the "cut and paste" method of revision was inadequate, and that what was needed was a total rethinking of the Code as a unified and coherent statement.

The Revision Committee reviewed many codes of ethics from other professions, chose a format, and identified the major areas of ethical concern in massage therapy today. If you look closely, you will see the basic values of the past–including echoes of The Pledge–but with additions of modern issues and concerns.

The new Code of 1989 will hopefully serve us well as the statement of professional standards that will guide us safely and proudly into the 21st Century. ■

You can get a frameable copy of the New AMTA Code of Ethics by sending a check or money order made out to AMTA for $3.50. Mail your request to: AMTA National Office, Attn: Membership Services, 1130 W. North Shore Ave., Chicago, Illinois, 60626-4670. Please print your name and address and FULL membership number when requesting your copy.